

Rules of the Game

Unarmed Attacks (Part Two)

By Skip Williams



Last week, we considered the basic rules for attacking without weapons. The basics usually prove sufficient when dealing with the occasional unarmed attack from a character who is caught without a weapon. When a character routinely attacks without weapons, things can become more complex.



The Improved Unarmed Strike Feat

As noted in Part One, the Improved Unarmed Strike feat allows you to make **unarmed attacks** as though you are armed. That is, you don't provoke an **attack of opportunity** when making an unarmed attack and you threaten the area around you.

In addition, your **unarmed strikes** deal **lethal damage** or **nonlethal damage** at your option. If you choose to deal lethal damage with your unarmed strike, you don't take a **penalty** on your **attack roll**.

Unarmed Strikes and Natural Weaponry

Before we move on, it's worth pointing out that a character making an unarmed attack, even with the Improved Unarmed Strike feat, does not have **natural weapons**. Nor is a natural weapon a substitute for the Improved Unarmed Strike feat.

As we saw in Part One, unarmed strikes allow iterative attacks and natural weapons do not.

A feat that requires natural weaponry as a prerequisite, such as Multiattack, doesn't work with unarmed strikes. Likewise, having a natural weapon is not a substitute for the Improved Unarmed Strike feat. For example, you don't meet the Improved Unarmed Strike prerequisite for the Deflect Arrows feat if you just have a natural weapon.

Remember, however, that magic weapon enhancements that work with natural weaponry, such as the *magic*

fangspell, also work with unarmed attacks. This rule allows pugilists and martial artists access to some magic weapon enhancements (also see the next section). It also reflects the fact that a creature making an unarmed strike is using part of its body in the attack.

Monk Unarmed Strike Class Feature

The monk class offers a potent subcategory of unarmed attack. The class provides Improved Unarmed Strike as a bonus feat, but the monk class offers some additional benefits for when fighting without weapons:

- A monk's unarmed strikes can be treated as either manufactured or natural weapons when applying spells or effects that enhance either manufactured or natural weapons. For example, either a *magic weapon* spell or a *magic fang* spell can enhance a monk's unarmed attacks.

This allows a monk access to all manner of weapon enhancements for her unarmed strikes. For example, a monk can use the Improved Natural Attack feat to increase her unarmed strike damage.

- A monk can make unarmed strikes with either hand interchangeably or with a knee, elbow, or foot.

A monk does not suffer an off-hand penalty when attacking unarmed. That is, the monk does not take any attack penalty and gains her full *Strength* bonus to damage (if any) no matter which appendage the monk uses to make the unarmed attack.

This rule doesn't exempt monks from two-weapon combat penalties (see below).

- A monk's unarmed strike damage increases with levels in the class.

A monk uses the unarmed strike damage entry for her monk level on Table 3-10 in the *Player's Handbook* (or on Table 3-11 for a Small or Large monk) instead of the normal unarmed strike damage for the character's size (see Part One).

A monk's unarmed strike threatens a *critical hit* on an attack roll of 20 and deals double damage on a confirmed critical hit.

- An unarmored monk can use a flurry of blows.

When unarmored (that is, when not wearing a suit of armor or using a shield), a monk using the full attack action can make one extra attack when attacking without a weapon or when using a special monk weapon.

Depending on the monk's class level, the extra attack might or might not impose an attack penalty (see the monk class description). If there is a penalty, it applies to all attacks the monk makes (such as attacks of opportunity) until the monk's next turn begins.

A monk cannot use a flurry when using anything other than an unarmed strike or a special monk weapon. A nonmonk weapon or a natural weapon can't be combined with a flurry in any way.

Unarmed Strikes and Manufactured Weapons

From time to time, characters might find it useful to throw in an unarmed attack along with an attack from a manufactured

weapon, such as a sword. Doing so requires the full attack action.

If the character in question isn't a monk, the rules governing attacks with two weapons cover this situation well. Most often, the character will use the unarmed attack as the off-hand weapon. The character makes one extra attack with the off-hand unarmed attack and gets the benefit of a light off-hand weapon; see the excerpt presented on this page for more details concerning two-weapon fighting. If the character does not have the Improved Unarmed Strike feat, the unarmed off-hand attack provokes an attack of opportunity from the foe the character attacks. The attacker gains only half his Strength bonus to damage for the off-hand attack.

Monks fighting with both manufactured weapons and unarmed attacks are a special case; see Part Three for details.

Unarmed Strikes and Natural Weapons

Just as a creature can add weapon attacks to a full attack made with natural weapons, so too can it combine unarmed attacks with natural weapons. Two options are available to accomplish this task.

A creature can choose to treat its unarmed attacks as its primary attacks and its natural weapons as secondary attacks. (This method is normally used to add weapon attacks to a natural attack routine.) The creature must make all unarmed attacks with its primary limb, which prevents that hand from being used for a natural attack such as a claw or slam. It uses its full **base attack bonus** for the natural attack, gaining additional attacks as normal for a high base attack bonus, and adds its full Strength bonus on **damage rolls**. Of course, each of these attacks provokes an attack of opportunity if the target is unarmed (unless the creature has Improved Unarmed Strike). However, its natural weapons all become secondary attacks, taking the -5 penalty on attack rolls (or -2 with the Multiattack feat) and adding only half the monster's Strength bonus on damage rolls.

A simpler method is to treat the creature's unarmed attack as an off-hand attack. (After all, an unarmed strike is rarely as effective as a weapon attack would be, so it doesn't really merit the same level of priority in the average monster's attack array.) Instead of using its primary limb to deliver the unarmed attack, it uses a kick, head butt, or other appendage that isn't otherwise used to deliver a natural attack. The creature gains one unarmed strike, which deals damage appropriate to its size plus half its Strength bonus (since it's an off-hand attack). A creature using this method suffers a -4 penalty on all attacks (since it's effectively fighting with two weapons and its off-hand weapon is light). The damage for its natural attacks is unchanged. This method requires fewer calculations on the fly, so it's probably easier to use in play.

Let's look at the nalfeshnee for an example of how each of these methods would work in play.

A nalfeshnee using the first method would have three unarmed attacks (thanks to its base attack bonus of +14).

From page 160 of the *Player's Handbook*:

TWO-WEAPON FIGHTING

If you wield a second weapon in your off hand, you can get one extra attack per round with that weapon. Fighting in this way is very hard, however, and you suffer a -6 penalty with your regular attack or attacks with your primary hand and a -10 penalty to the attack with your off hand. You can reduce these penalties in two ways:

- If your off-hand weapon is light, the penalties are reduced by 2 each. (An unarmed strike is always considered light.)
- The Two-Weapon Fighting feat lessens the primary hand penalty by 2, and the off-hand penalty by 6.

Table 8-10: Two-Weapon Fighting Penalties summarizes the interaction of all these factors.

Table 8-10: Two-Weapon Fighting Penalties

Circumstances	Primary Hand	Off Hand
Normal penalties	-6	-10
Off-hand weapon is light	-4	-8
Two-Weapon Fighting feat	-4	-4
Off-hand weapon is light and Two-Weapon Fighting feat	-2	-2

Applying its size modifier, and Strength modifier, the nalfeshnee's total attack modifiers for its three natural attacks are +19, +14, and +9. These natural attacks each deal 1d6+7 points of nonlethal damage. Each of the nalfeshnee's natural weapons takes a -2 penalty for a secondary natural weapon (thanks to the nalfeshnee's Multiattack feat) and gains only half the nalfeshnee's Strength modifier to damage, which gives it two secondary attacks, as follows: one bite +18 (2d8+3) and one claw +17 (1d8+3); it loses one claw attack in order to make unarmed attacks with its primary limb.

Using the second method, the nalfeshnee's natural attacks are made at a -4 penalty (bite +16, 2 claws +13) but deal normal damage. It then makes one unarmed attack at +15 (+14 for base attack bonus, -2 for size, +7 for Strength, -4 for off-hand light weapon) that deals 1d6+3 points of nonlethal damage.

What's Next?

We're out of time for this week. Next week, we'll look at a few special situations that arise when monks combine weapon attacks with unarmed attacks and other odds and ends regarding unarmed attacks.

About the Author

Skip Williams keeps busy with freelance projects for several different game companies and was the Sage of *Dragon Magazine* for many years. Skip is a co-designer of the **D&D** 3rd Edition game and the chief architect of the *Monster Manual*. When not devising swift and cruel deaths for player characters, Skip putters in his kitchen or garden (rabbits and deer are not Skip's friends) or works on repairing and improving the century-old farmhouse that he shares with his wife, Penny, and a growing menagerie of pets.

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